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The Tower of Babel Compounded

By Jacob Ornstein

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IN GHANA, one of the new African states, a session of Parliament is going on. What is so unusual about this? Nothing, except that it is being conducted in English — a tongue understood by less than 5 per cent of Ghanaian citizens.

The fact is that Ghana has more than 100 languages. And to have chosen any one of them as the official tongue would have caused bitterness and envy among the other groups and tribes. In African areas formerly held by Belgium and France, French has become the "national" language, again in countries where only a tiny minority can speak decent French.

The desperate need to find some common language of communication has caused the leaders of the new states, many of them anti-Western and nationalistic, to rely on the tongues of their former masters. Since World War II, more than 50 new nations have come into existence, many of them with a welter of languages. In Uganda, for example, the national radio must broadcast in 13 different languages.

TODAY BABEL plagues not only the new states of Africa but also those of South and Southeast Asia in a manner that probably would make the polyglot confusion of Biblical days pale by comparison.

In Africa, south of the Sahara, there are at least 800 distinct languages, of which only two, Swahili and Hausa, are spoken by as much as 8 per cent of the population. Many of these tongues have never been reduced to writing, and in very few of them are there technical writings of any importance.

In South Asia, India claims well over 100 languages, of which a dozen or so have long cultural and written traditions. That nation is striving to operate with Hindi as the over-all national tongue and 12 regional official tongues, such as Rajasthani, Bengali and Telugu. Despite this, for official, educational and technological purposes, this vast land is still obliged to depend upon English, which many would like to abandon because of its association with former colonial status.

THE NEED for a common tongue, basic to any country seeking national unity, has given rise to the new science of language planning. This involves not only choosing languages for na-

tional use but also developing and standardizing them once they have been selected. As often as not, it necessitates equipping a language that has been used only for everyday tribal needs, with the vocabulary needed for communication in a modern technological society.

Here we come to a point about the nature of language misunderstood even by some highly educated nonlinguists. Contrary to the idea that some tongues are inherently too primitive to express advanced concepts, the fact is that within its own grammatical structure, any language can be made to express any human concept.

All that is required is for new terminology and vocabulary to be coined or borrowed from other tongues, and to put these new terms into circulation through dictionaries, periodicals, books and instructional media.

DEVELOPING a language or dialect for broad usage is obviously a time-consuming process. It requires deciding which of different forms to select, creating a writing system and coining new terminology. But all official tongues have undergone this process.

Let it be recalled that when John Wycliffe first translated the Bible into

English, his opponents protested that this was a language too "rude" to be used for religious purposes. The Romance languages were at one time considered crude dialects unsuitable for refined usage, and far inferior to Latin. And in ancient Greek, Classical Latin or Biblical Hebrew, there were no terms for "deep freezer," "atomic reactor" or "jet aircraft," but the modern versions of those tongues have all these terms today.

Moreover, all languages constantly add terms in line with the developments of sociology or science or world events. For example, the unpleasant term "genocide," referring to the destruction of entire peoples, was coined right after World War II and has been incorporated into most Western languages.

HOWEVER, in much of emergent Africa and Asia there has simply not been time enough to develop the native tongues, most of which had never been reduced to writing and many of which were not understandable to large segments of the population. Among the few exceptions are Swahili in the East and

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Hausa in the West, both widely used and boasting a limited but growing literature.

The choice of English or French as the "national" official tongue, is bringing about some curious consequences. In most of these new lands only a tiny percentage can speak these tongues of wider communication. This means, in effect, that a knowledge of these languages opens doors to elite status, political position and leadership in education, technology and just about every field.

Unfortunately school facilities and competent instructors are in such short supply that only a minority of the young people in African lands can ever acquire these languages.

EIGHT NEW African nations have chosen English as their sole official medium: Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Bechuanaland, Nigeria, Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and Sierra Leone. The following 11 states, all formerly parts of French or Belgian colonial holdings, have adopted French: Central African Republic, Chad, Dahomey, Gabon, Niger, Senegal, Togo, Congo (Brazzaville), Congo (Leopoldville), Guinea, and Mali. One nation, Cameroun, opted to make both French and English official.

Very few nations have chosen multilingual solutions since the problem of conducting official business, providing identical translations and the like is a for-

midable one. Even such established governments as Belgium and Canada continue to suffer strains because of the competition between Flemish and French in the former and English and French in the latter.

Examples of new states which have chosen bilingual patterns are Afghanistan (Pashto and Persian), Algeria (Arabic and French), Ceylon (Sinhalese and Tamil), Rwanda (Kinyarwanda and French), Cameroun (French and English) and Burundi (Kirundi and French). Only one African land has adopted a native tongue as the exclusive official language. That is Tanganyika, with Swahili in that position.

In a world divided by 3000 languages, French and English have become important instruments for unity. As time passes, the native vernaculars will be built up for more complex tasks, but the great world languages are destined to play an important role for some time.

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